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ABSTRACT

Teachers should find it of value to become more cognizant of the degree to which they communicate awareness of subjectivity since the more accepting the socioemotional climate of the classroom, the greater will be the opportunity for expanded thinking, sharing of differing points of view, and learning in general. This awareness could be determined by measuring the degree to which the teacher signals that a point of view expressed in a given message is intended to represent a subjective perspective and that other points of view on the issue may, are likely to, or surely do exist. A system for classifiying teacher statements on the basis of sensitivity to subjectivity communicated in and through qualifying phrases would be useful in both research and practical use. A preliminary categorization might be the division of statements into two broad categories, with accompanying subsets. (1) statements that indirectly signal recognition of message subjectivity, (a) phrases that identify persons holding the point of view expressed in the original message, including those phrases which (i) expand, or (ii) limit the psychological room of the receiver to hold differing opinions; and (2) statements that directly express acceptance of the subjective nature of personal judgments, including (a) phrases expressing the right of others to hold differing points of view, and (b) phrases identifying persons who hold (or could hold) differing points of view. (MB)

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IMPROVING SOCIO-EMOTIONAL CLASSROOM CLIMATE BY COMMUNICATING THE DEGREE TO WHICH STATEMENTS ARE CONSIDERED BY TEACHERS TO BE SUBJECTIVELY HELD

A requisite for classroom learning is the existence of a positive socio-emotional climate in which the student feels comfortable and is motivated to learn (Ober, 1971). Socio-emotional climate was defined by Withall (1949), a pioneer in the study of classroom interaction as:

> ...a general emotional factor which appears to be present in interactions occurring between individuals in face-to-face groups. It seems to have some relationship to the degree of acceptance expressed by members of a group regarding each others needs or goals.

In this writer's opinion, communicating acceptance of other points of view begins with the sender of a message making psychological room for other points of view. If the sender of a message connotes that his/her expressed point of view is the best or indeed the only reasonable point of view on a given issue, the receiver of the message is given limited room for contributing other points of view.

One way in which the sender of a message can respond or restrict the psychological room in which a receiver can operate is to employ a phrase or clause that signals the degree to which a message is uniquely or commonly held. For example, when the sender of a message preceeds that message with the qualifying phrase, "Anyone with common sense knows...", the sender is displaying a doubt that other reasonable points of view exist and that unless the receiver wants to admit to having "no common sense", he/she should not suggest alternative points of view. Conversely, if one preceeds a

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statement with the qualifying phrase: "This is only one person's (or my) opinion...", psychological room is left for the receiver(s) of the message to suggest alternative points of view.

It is the writer's intent in this article to suggest the development of a conceptual framework, still incomplete, for systematically measuring the degree to which a teacher represents statements as uniquely or commonly held. The degree to which a teacher signals that a statement represents a unique point of view will be referred to herein as the teacher's "sensitivity to subjectivity".[1] A teacher's sensitivity to subjectivity could be determined by measuring the degree to which he/she signals that a point of view expressed in a given message is intended to represent a subjective or unique perspective and that other points of view on the issue may, are likely to or surely exist.

A system for classifying written and/or verbal teacher statements on the basis of degree of sensitivity to subjectivity communicated in and through qualifying phrases is presented as a point of departure (Redman, 1975).

The Classification System

The system for classifying teacher statements on the basis of the degree to which they signal sensitivity to the subjectivity in and through qualifying phrases is comprised of two broad categories. The first of two broad categories is designed to measure the frequency of qualifying phrases or clauses which indirectly signal the degree to which a sender considers a message to be subjectively held.

[1] Subjectivity-objectivity of a message refers to the degree to which a message is represented as uniquely or commonly held. A message is objectively held to the degree it is agreed upon by more than one person, that is, to the degree it has been intersubjectively verified. (Wehlage and Anderson, 1973).

The second broad category is designed to measure the frequency of qualifying phrases or clauses which directly communicate acceptance of the notion that personal judgments are subjective and that other points of view therefore are admissable and indeed invited. Figure 1.1 summarizes the category system.

Category I: Qualifying Phrases that Indirectly Signal Recognition of the Degree of Subjectivity Represented by a Message

Category I is designed to measure the degree to which a teacher employs phrases or clauses for the purpose of signalling the degree to which he/she considers an expressed message to be subjectively held. Subcategory I,A, is designed to measure the frequency of phrases and clauses which identify person(s) who hold the point of view expressed in the message. Examples of such phrases are: "This is just my own opinion--", "Our faculty agreed unanimously on the policy of..." and "Everyone knows--". The three examples illustrate a progression from greater to lesser psychological room in which a receiver of the message would have to operate. Indeed, the first example tends to have the effect of encouraging other points of view while the latter allows no room for divergent thoughts or feelings. Subcategory I,B, is designed to ascertain the frequency of use of qualifying phrases that directly identify persons who hold a point of view other than that expressed in the message. An example of such a phrase is, "Behavioral scientists would tend to disagree with me on this issue--they would say..."

Figure 1.1

Sensitivity to Subjectivity Categories

I. Qualifying phrases or clauses which indirectly signal cognizance of the degree of subjectivity (uniqueness) of a point of view expressed in a message by:

A. identifying persons who hold the point of view expressed in the original message, including those which:

1. expand the psychological room of the receiver of the message (those which encourage other points of view)
e.g. "In my opinion...", "I personally think...", "I believe...".

2. limit the amount of psychological room in which the receiver can operate (those which discourage other points of view)
e.g. "Everyone knows...", "It's obvious to all that...", "No one would disagree that...".

B. identifying person(s) who hold (or could hold) a point of view other than that expressed in the original message, including:

1. those which expand the psychological room of the receiver of the message (those which encourage representation of diverse points of view)
e.g. "Some people would take a different stance (followed by statement of a differing point of view), "I know Jim would disagree with me on the issue of..."

II. Qualifying phrases or clauses that directly express acceptance of the subjective nature of personal judgments by acknowledging:

A. the <u>right</u> of others to hold points of view other than that expressed in the original message.
e.g. "We all have a right to our own opinion--my stance on this issue is...", "Mrs. Lewis has a right to her point of view even though it doesn't agree with mine."

B. the <u>person</u> who holds (or could hold) a point of view other than that expressed in the original message.
e.g. "Mrs. Jones is a conscientious person who meant well but...", "I respect you as a person but I can't agree with your views on this issue."

Category II: Qualifying Phrases that Directly Express Acceptance of the Subjective Nature of Personal Judgments

The second broad category is designed to measure the frequency of use of qualifying phrases or clauses which directly express acceptance of the notions that: (1) others have a right to hold points of view other than that expressed (except in situations in which only one point of view is possible), and (2) persons should be accepted and respected as persons even though they hold different points of view on certain issues. An example of the former is "She was justified in stating her opinion even though...". An example of the latter is, "He is an exceptionally considerate person even though he doesn't agree with us on the issue of...". In each case the phrase directly expresses acceptance of the subjective nature of personal judgments.

Refinement and Use of the System

Before the category system can be used in research and/or practice further refinement must be done. The nature and scope of such development will of course depend upon the purpose for which and the context within which the system will be used.

Further development of the conceptual framework and/or the category system presented here should proceed in light of the following considerations. Firstly, the category system presented here refers only to the use of qualifying phrases or clauses which signal sensitivity to subjectivity. Other dimensions of communication such as the substance of the message itself, voice, intonation, and certain non-verbal behaviors may also signal one's sensitivity to subjectivity. Secondly, the use of the category system proposed

here depends upon whether the issue under consideration is "open" or "closed", that is, whether the issue is one which allows for a variety of points of view. For instance, the question: "Who was the first U.S. president?" is closed in that it does not allow for responses representing a variety of differing points of view. More controversial (valuative) issues on the other hand commonly give rise to responses representing multiple points of view. Thirdly, the need to communicate sensitivity to subjectivity will depend upon the nature of the relationships between the sender and receivers of a message. If the relationship is one in which both sender and receiver of a message are confident that a relatively permanent bond exists between them, they may feel less of a need to signal sensitivity to subjectivity. Indeed, in some relationships it may be the norm that because of unconditional positive regard of the parties, no restriction on psychological room is felt by either party unless an explicit restriction is made. Fourthly, the maturity level of the sender and particularly the receivers will affect the degree to which a teacher will need to signal sensitivity to subjectivity. In general, in instances where the receivers of a message are less mature (perhaps more impressionable, more subject to persuasive techniques, etc.) greater efforts should be made to signal the degree of representiveness of statements. In short, the category system presented in this article will need to be refined and applied adaptively to serve particular purposes in particular contexts in which it is used.

Conclusion

Teachers, perhaps more than any other group of professionals, are in a position to significantly affect the lives of our nation's youth. No other profession spends as much time and energy with our future citizens during their formative years.

Teachers need to be concerned about the quality and quantity of influence which they exert on impressionable minds of students. Teachers and others in positions of high influence should have the tools to systematically determine whether a given statement is viewed by students as representing the teacher's personal opinion, a group perspective, or a societal point of view on a given issue, and whether or not the degree of representativeness assigned to the statement by students is congruent with the degree of representativeness intended by the teacher.

The conceptual framework presented in this article is offered as a point of departure for the development of a systematic method of measuring the extent to which a teacher clarifies the degree to which he/she considers a point of view as subjectively (or objectively) held. The category system based on this framework was designed to aid in the measurement of the degree to which a teacher indicates (1) who holds the message expressed, (2) who holds or could hold a point of view other than that expressed, (3) whether he/she accepts the right of others to hold differing points of view on a given issue, and (4) whether he/she can and does respect as a person one who holds a point of view that differs from his/her own. The degree to which a teacher clearly communicates the above will indicate to the audience how much psychological room is being made for other points of view. The more "room" left for other points of

view, the more accepting will be the socio-emotional classroom climate--the less "room" available for differing points of view, the more rejecting will be the socio-emotional classroom climate. In turn, the more accepting the socio-emotional climate the greater will be the opportunity for expanded thinking, sharing of differing points of view, and learning in general. In short, teachers should find it of value to become more cognizant of the degree to which they communicate sensitivity to subjectivity in and through verbal and written messages.

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